New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1953

Volume XIV, Number 8 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of March 23, 1953

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"Camino Real"

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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Yearly Subscription $25.00

Published by CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, Inc., 235 East 22nd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

"Camino Real"

New York Post

March 20, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

An Enigma by Tennessee Williams

What was it that Winston Churchill said about the Soviet Union? Something, I believe, about a riddle wrapped in an enigma. Although I am not sure what Tennessee Williams is driving at in "Camino Real," I doubt if he intended it as a symbolic contemplation of present-day Russia, but, in every other way, Mr. Churchill's remark applies with amazing aptness to the new drama which opened last night at the National Theater. Colorfully and elaborately staged by Elia Kazan, Mr. Williams' latest offering is, to paraphrase another distinguished maker of famous quotations, full of sound and fury, signifying very little.

One thing the author of "A Streetcar Named Desire," "The Glass Menagerie" and "The Rose Tattoo" demonstrates rather conclusively in "Camino Real." It is that a talented and ambitious playwright, with an authentic lyric gift, can, by taking great pains and growing studiously pretentious, pick up his own drama and hurl it into oblivion. It is not, I feel sure, without intention that his new work is obscure and maddeningly self-conscious. All the evidence seems to suggest that he set out wilfully and purposely to be mannered, pretentious and difficult, and, in this perverse task, he has been only too successful.

Mixed Company

In an atmosphere reeking with ominous tragic symbolism, Mr. Williams shows us a grim and dusty village—apparently Mexican, although he insists that neither time or place is specified—in a period of the most melancholy festivity. In addition to the riffraff of the community, he sets down a group of sad romantic misfits, including an American ex-prizefighter with a bad heart, Casanova, Marguerite Gautier, Lord Byron, the innocent young prostitute daughter of a comic Gypsy mother, and, for a brief appearance at the end of his play, Don Quixote. In episodic fashion, he sings of their woes and their dreams.

It is a motley and potentially entertaining company that he has gathered together out of different centuries, and his characters have in common their bond of doomed and brooding dreams of love, loneliness and defeat. Since he is capable of writing with sensitive understanding, there are, even amid what I can't help thinking of as pompous nonsense, scenes that have their touching lyric moments, including a bitter reminiscence of Lord Byron, a sad meeting of ancient lovers between Casanova and the Lady of the Camellias, and a melanoholy encounter between the fighter and the girl prostitute. And when he sets out to do a comic episode for the shameless Gypsy mother, he can do it rather well.

Being Symbolic

But it isn't enough. Even the few effective interludes of romantic heartbreak that give fleeting moments of beauty to his play become bogged down in a kind of dogged determination to be as heavily symbolic as possible. There is, I think, no getting away from the fact that Mr. Williams is now taking himself so seriously as an important literary artist, whose every word must be full of the deepest and most significant import, that his very genuine qualities of dramatic lyricism are lost in a murky ponderousness. I fear he hasn't really the important and significant things to say he thinks he has.

Whatever must be said against "Camino Real," no one can accuse it of trying to be a realistic play, and Mr. Kazan has wisely staged it with all the color and movement and artifice at his command. I think he, too, becomes a bit pretentious about it, but that is in the spirit of the drama. The acting is, of a necessity, mannered and artificial, but Eli Wallach, a good performer at all times, is actually believable as the fighter, and there is a certain vividness in the characterizations of Joseph Anthony, Hurd Hatfield and Barbara Baxley, while Jennie Goldstein is amusingly racy as the horrible Gypsy. But "Camino Real" is an enigmatic bore.

"CAMINO REAL"

Play by Tennessee Williams; staged by Elia Kazan; production designed by Lemuel Ayers; incidental music by Bernardo Segall; presented by Cheryl Crawford and Ethel Reiner in association with Walter P. Chrysler, Jr., at the National Theatre, March 19, 1953. The cast:

Gutman.....Frank Silvera
Survivor.....Guy Thomajan
Rosita.....Aza Bard
1st Officer.....Henry Silva
Gentleman of Fortune.....Joseph Anthony
La Madrecita de los Perdidos..Vivian Nathan
Her Son.....Rolando Valdez
Kilroy.....Eli Wallach
1st Street Cleaner.....Nehemiah Persoff
2nd Street Cleaner..Fred Sadoff
Abdullah.....Ernesto Gonzalez
Bum in a Window..Martin Balsam
A. Ratt.....Mike Gazzo
Loan Shark.....Salem Ludwig
Baron.....David J. Stewart
Lobo.....Ronne Aul
2nd Officer....William Lennard
Grotesque Mummer.....Gluck Sandor
Lady of Legend....Jo Van Fleet
Lady Mulligan....Lucille Patton
Waiter.....Page Johnson
Romantic Poet....Hurd Hatfield
Navigator of the Fugitivo.....Antony Vorno
Market Woman..Charlotte Jones
2nd Market Woman.....Joanna Visher
Street Vendor.....Ruth Volner
Lord Mulligan...Parker Wilson
Gypsy.....Jennie Goldstein
Esmeralda.....Barbara Baxley
Eva.....Mary Grey

Daily Mirror

March 20, 1953

'Camino Real' Will Please Some, Anger Others

By ROBERT COLEMAN

In "Camino Real," Tennessee Williams has penned a play that is likely to delight the few and amaze the many. Like Philip Barry before him, he probably tired of making money from obviously successful scripts and decided to wrestle for a while with the gods. That's seldom a paying proposition nowadays.

"Camino Real" might roughly be translated as the Royal Road of Life. In this instance, it's focused in 16 exotic and unidentified blocks or episodes. Bitter, cynical, sardonic episodes. All but the last, which says that for all of the frustrations, disappointments and heartbreaks of existence the brief journey is worth it.

AS HE DID in "The Glass Menagerie," Williams uses a commentator, one Gutman, a cruel and sadistic inn-keeper. His observations set the stage for such varied characters as a broken-down prize-fighter with a bum ticker, Camille, Casanova, Lord Byron, beggars, rogues and women of easy virtue.

They are an unhappy lot, like the interpreter of Oscar Hammerstein's "Ol' Man River"—tired of living and scared of dying. They undergo humiliation, grovel in the dust, take unmerciful beatings. They dance with aimless frenzy. Anything, rather than be carted off by the "street cleaners."

There's noble writing in "Camino Real," mixed with vulgarity. But Williams could argue that life is like that. There are magnificent and trivial moments, tender and tawdry ones. Somehow, they jar. They never blend into the rewarding whole that one eagerly awaits. Often there is quality, and too often a lack of it.

• • •

ONE MUST ADMIRE the courage of Cheryl Crawford, Ethel Reiner and Walter P. Chrysler, Jr., in presenting "Camino Real," and admiration must extend to Elia Kazan's exciting direction and Lemuel Ayers' stunning production. They have accomplished wonders with an extremely difficult play.

Eli Wallach is nothing less than terrific as Kilroy, the baffled boxer. Joseph Anthony is properly robust, in the flamboyant, old-school style of acting, as Casanova. Jo Van Fleet is a memorable Camille. Hurd Hatfield delivers beautifully Williams' Byronic commentary on the burning of Shelley.

Barbara Baxley is a shapely, provocative courtesan. Jennie Goldstein contributes hilarious sequences as a greedy, hard-boiled gypsy. David J. Stewart etches an effete Baron with skill. And Frank Silvera does well by the coldly amused commentator.

• • •

"CAMINO REAL" is an arresting, vivid, kaleidoscopic, diffuse fantasy. It invariably strikes sparks, even though they fly off in too many directions. It is Williams' most ambitious, if least satisfying script. It should cause heated discussion. Some will love it; others will loathe it.

It is the type of adventure, we suspect, that gives to the spectator as much as he brings to it. It is a demanding play to sit through. There is so much contrapuntal movement and dialogue that the attention is forced to shift constantly. And, whether you like it or not, it's theatre.

One first-nighter at the National sagely observed: "'Camino Real' is burlesque for Ph.D's."

The New York Times

March 20, 1953

Tennessee Williams Writes a Cosmic Fantasy Entitled 'Camino Real'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Looking into the corners of his heart, Tennessee Williams has written a strange and disturbing drama. "Camino Real" he calls it. It was played with great skill and ingenuity at the National last evening. Since "Camino Real" is a kind of cosmic fantasy, one must not interpret it literally. But to one theatregoer it seems to be the mirror of Mr. Williams' concept of life—a dark mirror, full of black and appalling images.

For the characters who walk the Camino Real are lost in luxury and corruption. With the exception of a poet named Byron and a romancer named Don Quixote, no one escapes if you ignore an odd handful of nondescript travelers. Mr. Williams' pessimism is frightening. "Camino Real" goes beyond melancholy into melancholia. For the fantasies that boil through the central plaza of the play have a psychopathic bitterness in them.

* * *

Still, this is what Mr. Williams thinks, and it has to be reckoned with. In the first place, he is honest about it. He does not hide behind any of the usual formalities. Some of it is explicit enough to be revolting. In the second place, Mr. Williams is an artist. Breaking with the realistic theatre entirely, he has now written a long incantation with a long cast of characters and a constant flow of mood and experience and the great mass of it is lucid and pertinent.

People who say that they do not understand it may be unwilling to hear the terrible things it records about an odious no-man's land between the desert and the sea. A sensitive, virtuoso writer, Mr. Williams knows how to create an intelligible world. As theatre, "Camino Real" is as eloquent and rhythmic as a piece of music.

* * *

Although Mr. Kazan is known best for hard-headed performances, he has directed "Camino Real" with poetic ingenuity. In a massive symbolic set by Lemuel Ayers that encloses the play and blocks off the turbulent world outside, the performance moves lightly through a miasma of hopelessness, cruelty and decadence—never literal, never dull or diffuse.

There is also some poignant acting. Eli Wallach's good-humored, colloquial portrait of Kilroy, the American boy, is excellent. Jo Van Fleet's pathetic Camille, Joseph Anthony's frightened Casanova, Frank Silvera's heartless, jeering landlord, Jennie Goldstein's raucous gypsy, Barbara Baxley as her strumpet daughter, Hurd Hatfield as the poet who still has a touch of purity in his soul—are beautifully acted character portraits. As theatre work, the production and performance are superb.

* * *

As a writer, Mr. Williams has unlocked his mind and told his version of the truth about human destiny. Although it is horrifying, it is also pathetic. For it is a world surrounded with death and inhumanity, and decked with the flowers of evil. Even the people who respect Mr. Williams' courage and recognize his talent are likely to be aghast at what he has to say.

DAILY NEWS

March 20, 1953

Symbols Clash in 'Camino Real'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Compared with Tennessee Williams' "Camino Real," Thornton Wilder's "The Skin of Our Teeth" was as simple as "Potash and Perlmutter." The Williams wotsit was unveiled like a monument at the National Theatre last evening and it induced in this observer an acute state of misery.

"Sixteen Blocks on the Camino Real" is the full title of this work, upon which the author is reported to have spent two years expanding it from a one-acter to a three-acter. It is an enormous jumble of five-cent philosophy, $3.98 words, ballet, music, symbolism, allegory, pretentiousness, portentousness, lackwit humor, existentialism and overall bushwah.

Intellectual, Maybe.

A play so irritating to one observer must have some value, though, for it arouses some kind of emotion, however unpleasant. "Camino Real" may, indeed, become the darling of selfconscious intellectuals. If you are an intellectual, the piece is at the National for you to see and to make a fad of. But don't count on any help from me, because I am not the brainy type.

And do not count on me for a report of the plot. If Williams couldn't do it in three acts and with words like "digital extremities" for plain fingers, I can't do it in the space available here. But I can give you a start. Eli Wallach, an Ordinary American in blue dungarees, finds himself in an unidentified place he wants to get out of.

This place has balconies, houses, a stairway leading up to nowhere and steps leading down from the stage to the audience so that several of the 36 actors with speaking parts can come down and screech in the aisles. As a piece of scenery it is quite wonderful, and Lemuel Ayers is to be complimented for designing it.

Lots of Directing.

The 36 actors include, besides Wallach—who is an ingratiating player and a pretty good hoofer, too—Frank Silvera, Joseph Anthony, David J. Stewart, Jo Van Fleet, Jennie Goldstein, Barbara Baxley and Hurd Hatfield.

Thirty-five of these actors seem to be involved symbolically in Wallach's unhappy journey through life. They have been directed for a maximum of movement by Elia Kazan, and perhaps to Kazan but not to me every little movement has a meaning of its own. I gathered, after "Camino Real" was over, that Tennessee Williams is real sorry for the human race. So am I—or at least for me.

Herald Tribune

NEW YORK

March 20, 1953

'Camino Real'

By WALTER F. KERR

IT IS this reviewer's opinion that Tennessee Williams is the best playwright of his generation. It is also the reviewer's opinion that "Camino Real," which opened at the National Thursday, is the worst play yet written by the best playwright of his generation.

The eccentric, highly cerebral, and always self-consciously poetic stew which Mr. Williams has now visited upon us is described, in an introductory footlight chat, as a "serious circus." A few moments later it is further described as a "bazaar where the human heart is part of the bargain," and this last is both the play's proudest boast and its most flagrant misrepresentation.

* * *

That the author is deeply serious about touching the quickness of the human heart, and of simultaneously touching a good many hearts in the audience, cannot be doubted. That he ever stood a chance of doing so by literally cutting the heart out of one of his principal characters, holding it up in a spotlight, and bandying it about the stage, is altogether unlikely. This—together with a good many similar symbolic flourishes—does actually take place at the National, and the result is as cold as the corpse on the imaginary operating table.

Mr. Williams is hopelessly mired in his new love—symbolism. "Camino Real" takes place nowhere. The price of admission to this mythical mortuary is "desperation." Kilroy is here. Camille is here. Byron, with club foot and blazing eyes, is here. So is Casanova.

* * *

All are talking of 'flight,' but when an airplane named the Fugitivo takes off for nowhere else, not many of these fuming and frantic figures have the necessary passports to go with it. While they wait, and engage in cryptic and soulful conversation with one another, a variety of other images erupts around them. A red-headed madame does a broadcast commercial for her brothel, and announces that the moon has generously restored the virginity of her daughter. Silent policemen stalk occasional homosexuals, and shoot them down. A man staggers down a stone staircase and remembers his childhood pony before he dies. As one or another of these not quite human fragments hits the earth, a squad of street-cleaners hoists the departed into a pushcart and heads, presumably, for the city dump. At the end, Kilroy, Camille, and Casanova are led cheerfully away by a rosily romantic Don Quixote de la Mancha.

* * *

Obviously, Mr. Williams is attempting to apply the methods of lyric poetry—the images made of illogical and unexpected combinations, the processes of free association, the emphasis on mythology—to the spoken stage. But the poetic imagination must have something realistic to exercise its imagination on, some actuality to serve as a point of departure. "Camino Real" is all departure and no point. The author is here preoccupied with techniques for getting at truth, without having any particular truth he wants to get at. The play is all method—studiously applied—and method applied to a vacuum.

The production is frequently interesting. Elia Kazan has staged it with flamboyant vigor, chasing his actors across the footlights, down the aisles, and sometimes into the balconies. Lemuel Ayers has designed an exotic and flavorsome patio, surrounded by a high and crumbling stone wall, and studded with phrenology charts, window dummies, and illuminated pawnshop signs.

Eli Wallach is an appealing Kilroy—a fighting American whose ticker has gone bad, who has "a streak of anarchy in him," and